

Role-Playing for Inhibited Students in Paternal Communities

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In such paternal communities as Saudi Arabia, students belong to families where the authority of the father is so great that he is the domineering figure in the household. Submission is usually expected from the wife and the children, and arguing with the head of the family is generally viewed as disobedient and even ill-mannered. Similarly, elder members of the family most often dominate the younger members. It follows that children usually tend to be inhibited in the presence of their elders in general and their fathers in particular and are often reluctant to participate in discussions while shunning communicative interaction and sociolinguistic exchanges.

Consequently, Saudi students usually seem inhibited, timid, and hesitant. Most of the teachers assume the father's role; they tend to be authoritative, domineering, and are the main source of information. They lecture most of the time and do not allow class participation and student-teacher communicative interaction. This reflects negatively on the learning process in general and on foreign language learning in particular. Specifically, the spoken English of the majority of Saudi students is unsatisfactory as their communicative language skills remain undeveloped.

This paper is, therefore, an attempt to highlight classroom role-playing as a psychological aid which fosters self-confidence in inhibited, timid, hesitant, and passive students and relieves them of their paternal communicative limitations. It also proposes an overall strategy for role-playing as an effective communicative activity that teachers can exploit to help students break the ice and participate in language classes so as to develop their speaking/communicative skills in an interesting and rewarding manner. Our underlying assumption in planning this strategy is that if students enjoy their learning experience, they will be highly motivated, will be willing to participate, and will learn better. The progression can be depicted as follows:

Fun - Motivation - Participation - Learning

Role-playing activities, which range from telling a story to acting out a specific situation, have been a significant breakthrough in language learning (Robinson 1981). Role-playing stimulates realistic conversation and effective communication in foreign language learners in particular. It fosters interaction in the classroom as learners free themselves from social constraints that hamper the development of their communicative linguistic skills and the way they relate to their teachers. Once students see the new role or identity a situation as real, they will be motivated to produce real life language. Furthermore, role-playing helps students achieve, as Burges (1992:20) puts it, "a greater understanding of their own society. (as well as) greater cross-cultural understanding."

Before undertaking role-playing activities, teachers have to attempt to help students relax. Psychologically speaking, students' attitudes towards classroom participation in general, and

role-playing in particular, need to be corrected. Contrary to what they might have experienced in their paternal families, they need to be convinced that they have an active role in determining the shape and extent of their learning in the classroom, and that their active class participation contributes to their learning.

Students also need to be encouraged to feel at ease when role-playing. To accomplish this, the teacher must emphasize the enjoyment of the role-playing activity, and encourage the students to enjoy it. The teacher should start the session with a warm-up activity to create a relaxed, friendly atmosphere before going into the actual performance. This may include, for example, cracking a joke, reading a comic strip, or getting a talented student to mime. The teacher must lower the affective filter by assuring students that no penalties will be imposed on them for hesitations, mistakes, or other failures. S/he should tolerate their resistance, and should not expect positive responses right away. Further encouragement can be provided by giving them regular feedback on their performance. In this respect, role-playing activities may be taped or televised so that students may play them for self evaluation and correction. Taped roleplays by former students may also be demonstrated to them, graded from weak performances to satisfactory ones, to emphasize that "you can do it."

For role-playing activities to impress students and be effective in developing their communicative skills, the subject matter should be selected very carefully. Much of the hesitation on the part of students towards role-playing may be related to the dialogue itself. A dialogue may be silly and/or difficult to understand, or culturally offensive. It may also be lengthy, and timid students would not risk participating in lengthy role- playing dialogues lest they err and become embarrassed in front of their colleagues.

The teacher should, therefore, make sure that the subject matter of the dialogue is interesting to the students and culturally inoffensive. It will be useful to start with situations from the first language cultural context and lead gradually to English language situations. The teacher should also start with simple language dialogues, and then proceed gradually to advanced material. In cases where the teacher finds it advisable to simplify useful dialogues, the teacher should do so carefully so as to maintain the gist of the dialogue. Lengthy dialogues may be divided into smaller episodes to be performed in different sessions or by different groups in the same session.

To capture the students' interest and attention, role-playing dialogues must be varied in content, style, and technique. They may be, for example, comic, sarcastic, persuasive, or narrative. Exemplary role-playing techniques that are useful and enjoyable to students and which encourage students to use their linguistic reservoir in a favorable life-like manner are the following: *TV stories*, *pictorial situations*, *cloze dialogues*, and *student scenarios*.

In a TV story, students watch a videotaped TV story without sound. They improvise what the actors say. The videotape is replayed with sound for comparison and corrections. Students may listen to the first oral segment on the tape to get background information about the dialogue they will role-play.

In a pictorial situation, students are shown a picture of a life-like situation with a number of people talking to each other. They study the situation suggested by the picture and act it out, improvising the scenario.

In a cloze dialogue, the teacher selects a dialogue with two or more speakers. Every second or third oral exchange is left blank except for the first and last two/three oral exchanges, which are left intact. Students examine the dialogue to familiarize themselves with it, and they role-play it, filling in the gaps with appropriate oral responses.

In student scenarios, students are divided into groups, with a fairly good student in each group as a leader. All groups are given the same situation/background information and are asked to build up their own scenarios for the situation. A panel of student judges will choose the best scenario(s) to be role-played by the respective group(s).

Here, it is worth noting that the gender of the participants in the dialogue poses a serious problem in a paternal community. Saudi students, for example, find it embarrassing, to play the role of a character of the opposite sex. This is not as much chauvinism as it is a social value fed by the conventional sex segregation common in schools as well as in other aspects of social life. Here, the teacher should attempt to overcome this problem by doing the following:

- playing the role of the opposite sex him/herself at the beginning, then asking daring and more willing students to play these roles and calling later upon hesitant students to play such roles.
- using roles of the opposite sex, especially feminine roles, in appropriate sociocultural contexts, and avoiding culturally offensive roles such as the roles of girlfriends, waitresses, bartenders, etc.
- using sex-neutral roles such as the roles of teachers, secretaries, doctors, managers, etc.

As for students' errors while role-playing, the teacher should concentrate at the beginning on overall performance and encourage students to participate without interrupting their performance repeatedly to correct grammar and/or pronunciation errors. Only errors that impede communication should be corrected. Grammar and pronunciation errors may be corrected later in another session to avoid embarrassing, discouraging, or inhibiting participants.

To conclude, drawing out timid, inhibited students in paternal communities is really a challenging task for foreign language teachers. A teacher in such communities is, therefore, strongly recommended to design and exploit language activities that initiate self-confidence in inhibited students and encourage them to participate confidently and successfully in class. Role-playing as highlighted above meets the communicative needs of such students and stimulates their linguistic competence for spontaneous performance. It also reinforces the students' self-confidence for classroom learning activities in other subjects as they start to realize that they do understand and can be understood. Further, it builds up the students' confidence for future real-life situations when they put their English to actual use because they will have then, as Burges (1992:20) points out, "become accustomed to thinking on their feet."

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